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Critical waves: exploring identity, discourse and praxis in western feminism

The symbol of the wave dominates narratives of feminism, despite regular questioning by feminists who are sceptical about what it signifies (Henry, 2004).ⁱ Those who oppose the use of the wave narrative criticise the way in which it 'paralyses feminism', setting up false dichotomies between generations of feminists (Gillis and Munford, 2004). Conversely, others argue that it provides a useful way of thinking through the chronology of feminism (Baumgardner, 2011). We contend that this either/or approach to the use of the wave narrative is unhelpful for feminist scholars and the wider feminist movement alike. Instead, this article suggests that feminists should engage in a constant critique of the shifting discourses and wider strategic implications surrounding the waves; an on-going critique that accepts both the limitations and opportunities that the wave narrative offers. In so doing we seek to encourage greater inter-wave dialogue, one that does not rely on the politics of opposition, but one that depends upon healthy debate and feminist solidarity. Drawing upon analysis of key feminist writings and empirical research undertaken with feminist activists in the UK, this article stresses the importance of continuity, inclusivity and multiplicity, three critical themes within feminism that should constitute an important part of any critical engagement with the wave narrative. Rather than simply accept or reject the wave narrative, this article seeks to engage with the various ways in which the wave metaphor enables or constrains continuity, inclusivity and multiplicity through analysis of feminist identity, discourse and praxis.

The wave narrative, coined by Marsha Lear, was intended to distinguish US, UK and European women's liberation movements from the campaigns for women's suffrage (Gamble, 2006).ⁱⁱ However, even a brief survey of the literature highlights that it is no longer

used in a purely chronological or thematic fashion; indeed, the wave is for many a problematic device. The extant literature highlights a number of key flaws with the wave structure: it sets up generational barriers between feminists (Gillis and Munford, 2004); excludes feminists of colour (Springer, 2002); privileges western feminism (Hemmings, 2005); presents paradoxes of confusion when cross-wave themes and aims are combined (Graff, 2003); and creates both collective and individual crises of feminist subjectivities amongst those who do not identify clearly with a specific wave (Kinser, 2004). We recognise the legitimacy of these critiques and in particular acknowledge the importance of inclusion, a leitmotif throughout these arguments. However, given that feminists *do* define themselves through the wave narrative (Walker, 1992; Heywood and Drake, 1997; Baumgardner and Richards, 2000), whilst scholars continue to provide academic evaluations of the themes, ideas and modes of activism within specific waves (Woodward and Woodward, 2009; Dean, 2009; Bobel, 2010; Budgeon, 2011), we suggest that a more reflexive and fluid use of the term wave, that privileges continuity, inclusivity, and multiplicity, becomes increasingly important.

Continuity is vital to a successful and healthy feminist movement (Whelehan, 1995). This is not to say that theories, ideas and feminist praxis should remain stilted, but learning from the past to aid new and on-going campaigns seems axiomatic. In trying to establish newness the third wave in particular has been criticised for its disregard for the history of the feminist movement (Snyder, 2008). Whilst undoubtedly true for some, many have been keen to point out that the act of renewal does not equate to a disavowal of that which has gone before (Baumgardner and Richards, 2000; Heywood and Drake, 1997; Redfern and Aune, 2010). Negative definitions dominate the discourse surrounding the emergence of a new wave, whereby proponents are forced to defend *why* a new wave is necessary. We suggest that

feminists should resist the temptation to be drawn into defining how ‘new’ a wave is, or indeed to justify why a new wave should be necessary; instead the wave metaphor should be used to stress the underlying continuity of the feminist movement.

An on-going critique of the wave narrative ensures that we continue to question both who is included and also who is *excluded* from the discourse. Despite narrowing our focus to western feminism (specifically, the impact of US texts on UK activism) we cannot escape the fact that the wave narrative also traditionally excludes western women of colour (Henry, 2004; Springer, 2002). This point is illustrated by the stories that have emerged regarding the origins of third wave feminism. Despite the earliest calls for a third wave coming from women of colour (Walker, 1992; Orr, 1997), for many, the third wave quickly became synonymous with white, young, well-educated women (hooks, 1994; Hurdis, 2002). Despite scholars highlighting the coterminous rise of the third wave with black feminist jurisprudence, it is an area largely ignored by key third wave texts (Taylor, 2001). In addition to race, we also identify age as being a particularly salient characteristic to explore. The generational interpretation of the waves has proved particularly problematic; not least because third wave texts identified third wavers as synonymous with generation X, those born between 1961 and 1981 (Dicker and Piepmeir, 2003). However, the fluidity of this definition is clear, with those generationally belonging to the third wave identifying as second wave and vice versa (Baumgardner, 2011). We also acknowledge and recognise the ways in which the wave narrative has marginalised lesbians, bisexuals, those from a working class background, women with disabilities, trans-gender women and men. Thus, it is incumbent upon feminists hailing a new wave of feminism to actively engage with the language of inclusivity.

The wave narrative does not conform to a neat progressive notion of history; indeed, it is possible to speak of the second, third and fourth waves of feminism as being coterminous. The emergence of a new wave does not require the automatic consignment of the previous wave to the history books. Indeed, the intersection between the waves is an important site for rigorous and healthy debate; debates that are both conceptual and chronological. We know from our own empirical research with feminist activists in the UK that there are feminists who identify as second, third or fourth wave just as there are plenty of feminists who reject the wave narrative. The task of a new wave is not simply to herald the end of the previous wave, nor to assume the mantle of leadership. Despite popular narratives and well-documented instances of racism and classism, the feminist movement has always been heterogeneous with a polymorphic approach. Thus, the co-existence of multiple waves of feminism holds great possibility, each containing within it what Mann and Huffman refer to as ‘mini narratives’ (2005: 70). Progressive social and political movements do not make advances simply by negating multiplicity of thought and action – particularly when they are driven by the same ultimate aim.

Methods

This article argues that continuity, inclusivity and multiplicity are a critical part of reflecting on the political usefulness of adopting the wave narrative. Moreover, this article is an attempt to consider the challenges and opportunities that the wave narrative and the waves themselves pose for contemporary feminism. In order to best explore the various ways in which the wave is understood and deployed by feminist activists, the article draws upon 40 in depth interviews undertaken with feminists in the UK between January and May 2012. Interviews were conducted with feminists involved in local campaign groups and with nationwide organisations in London, Bristol and Glasgow.ⁱⁱⁱ Participants were identified by initial email

contact with local feminist groups and also through the use of a snowballing technique, whereby some interviewees suggested we contacted named individuals. The interviewees came from a wide variety of backgrounds and every effort was made to ensure diversity in terms of age, race, class and sexuality; this is where snowballing was of particular use in helping to identify individuals from under-represented groups, (Noy, 2008) specifically this allowed us to ensure that interviews with trans-feminists and Muslim feminists were undertaken. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and an hour and a half and were fully transcribed; in order to ensure that interviewees felt able to discuss a range of issues without fear of reprisal, full anonymity was assured.^{iv}

Following previous feminist scholars, we highlight the importance of bringing together feminist theory and activism (Fonow and Cook, 1991; Reinharz and Davidman, 1992). Indeed, to our minds the unifying purpose of feminism is a combination of intellectual commitment and political action to identify and eliminate all forms of sexism and violence against women. Thus, by combining both theoretical and empirical research we seek to privilege women's perspectives; in so doing we acknowledge the importance of on-going dialogue between scholars and activists. The nature of qualitative research necessarily requires researchers to reflect upon veracity and reliability (Bryman, 2000; Gomm, 2004); moreover, whilst not completely unavoidable every effort was made to guard against an unequal power dynamic emerging during the interview, thus questions were worded simply without relying on *academese* (Maynard and Purvis, 1994). Inevitably though we must accept that for some, particularly younger interviewees, there may have been a tendency to look to the interviewer for approval when articulating their responses (Harrison, 2001). As such, interviewees were told very clearly that there was no right or wrong answer to the question and that we were interested in their opinions and perceptions. After some initial questions

about how and why they became involved with feminist activism, the interview moved on to explore the ideas surrounding feminist waves.

Although our focus is on UK feminism, couched within a growing awareness of the importance of and increasing awareness of third wave feminism, we also drew upon textual analysis of key self-identified third wave texts, which largely originate from the US. Whilst our data is drawn from the UK, we contend that the findings and broader arguments for the continued use of the wave narrative have a wider appeal for those from across the west. The article now moves on to present and analyse the empirical data; it does this by exploring the extent to which feminist identity, discourse and praxis can best help us understand the ways in which the wave can help us advance continuity, inclusivity and multiplicity.

Feminist identity

Feminist waves are much discussed and debated in academic and activist writing; to some extent each has a distinct identity. The first is perhaps the easiest to define because of its suffragette agitators and central aim of achieving votes for women (Rowbotham, 1999). The second wave is more complex, originating in the late 1960s with focus shifting to the social and personal; women deserved equal pay and the right to determine the fate of their own bodies. There was also an increase in the focus on sexual liberation in an attempt to progress beyond the oppressive gendered double standard (Rich, 1971; Baumgardner and Richards, 2000). The third wave is possibly more difficult to identify, as it is widely acknowledged as the most disparate of the waves (Tong, 2009; McRobbie, 2009). Predicated on difference, references to the third wave became more prolific in the early '90s to reflect a feminism that was aspiring to greater inclusivity, foregrounding queer and non-white issues in an attempt to move away from white middle-class hegemony (Baumgardner and Richards, 2000). The

fourth wave has spawned the least critical writing, but is drawing strongly from the dialogues and activism encouraged by the use of social media, such as Twitter. These identities, much discussed, are in many respects detrimental to cross-generational dialogue. As opposed to suggesting that feminism is still a vital movement, the identity attributed to each wave results in a rigidity that prevents not only the foregrounding of similarity, but discussion between different waves. The fact that second, third and fourth waves exist simultaneously, but have been defined through their dissimilarities, exacerbates arguments between the three, and creates confusion surrounding what constitutes each wave, an idea expressed by several interviewees:

I'm not one hundred percent sure what it means to be third wave but from what I've read *it seems to be opposed to second wave.*^v (London, interviewee)

So, I've heard a few people mention fourth wave feminism but how is that different to third wave feminism? I get how third wave feminism differs from second but *what's new about the fourth wave?* (Glasgow interviewee)

For the interviewees, there was an assumption that waves should necessarily differ and to some extent compete, even whilst the participants were not always confident in offering a definition of each wave. While the fourth wave is still so novel that it is yet to enter fully into the problematic relationship between different waves, the second and third waves' differences have been widely documented. Second wave feminists struggle with what they perceive to be an individualistic and selfish impulse in the third wave (Włodarczyk, 2010), while younger feminists believe the movement that preceded them to be sanctimonious, judgemental and exclusive (Baumgardner and Richards, 2000; Finley and Reynolds Stringer, 2010). By

bestowing identities upon the waves themselves, feminists are promoting conflict, as opposed to considering the ways in which the narrative can encourage a transcendence of individual identity in order to mobilise a collective.

The relationship between the wave and individuality is twofold. While waves negate the work of single feminists, in some cases (mostly as a result of the press and reportage) they promote or bring others to the fore in order to create figureheads; indeed, Mann and Huffman note wave narratives ‘too often downplay the importance of individual and small-scale collective actions’ (2005: 58). While it is inevitable that figures will take precedence, or gain more media attention, such emphasis on the individual leads to certain women assuming the role of ‘figurehead’ for a whole surge of activism. Rather than this being useful, the prioritising or prominence of individuals ensures that the waves will be defined around a person, and as a result, linked intrinsically to the identities of a minority. The self-appointment of feminist leaders is something that many of the interviewees highlighted as being deeply problematic, as one London feminist argued: ‘I think it’s bad to associate one or two people with the feminist movement or with this so-called third wave. Feminism is a collective movement.’ Rebecca Walker is not the mother of third wave feminism, no more than the second wave is entirely comprised of Betty Friedan imitations.^{vi} It is limiting for a wave to become linked with specific women, because the individual is positioned – often incorrectly – as a synecdoche. The second wave is not the era of disaffected housewives, in the same way that the third wave is not entirely comprised of make-up wearing entrepreneurs.

When each wave is scrutinised, it is evident that there are multiple identities included within each surge. Through reducing a wave to a one-dimensional set of characteristics, we overlook the internal discussion and conflict necessary in the formation of politics. The

famous Suffragettes had an avant-garde counterpart, Feminists, who rather than working on political and social parity, were ‘motivated by the desire to subvert the overarching category of “woman”, about whose sexual instincts of political interests so many generalisations were made’ (Delap, 2007: 6). The second wave, rather than being a time of feminist unity and activism, fragmented further into: radical-libertarian feminists, radical cultural feminists, classical liberal feminists and welfare liberal feminists (Tong, 2009). The third wave has attempted to elude definitive definition, and despite being characterised as a selfish and disparate feminism (Włodarczyk, 2010), its inclusivity ensures that all identities are welcome to contribute. This undermining of the ‘wave identity’ is further called into question by the co-existence of the fourth, third and second waves. Despite Baumgardner and Richards’ claims that ‘the difference between the First, Second and Third Waves is our cultural DNA’ (2000: 129), such linear consideration of ideological development is not necessarily useful, nor appropriate. If the wave is not indicative of either uniform political, generational or individual identity, if in fact, the wave has not been determined by a cultural genotype, in what ways does it enable both feminist and female identity to progress?

The wave narrative does, at least in part, help us reconcile some of the problems that have been raised by thinkers such as Judith Butler, who states that ‘there is a political problem that feminism encounters in the assumption that the term women denotes a common identity’ (Butler, 1990: 4). For us, the term wave acts as an umbrella under which a diverse range of feminists (women and men alike) can coalesce. Elements of third wave feminism have responded to this particularly sensitively, attempting to consider transgender identities (Penny, 2011) and ensuring that difference thrives within a non-prescriptive movement. Feminism recognises that in order to form cogent collectivity, it is not necessary for uniform identification to exist amongst political subjects, or as Riley succinctly states: ‘identity is not

the same as solidarity' (Riley, 2000: 133). Questioning identity as a requirement for involvement with feminist activism is a necessary political act, forcing an engagement with 'the very terms through which identity is articulated' (Butler, 1990: 203). The wave comes to shape a politics, which attempts to maintain both direction and inclusivity for a multiplicity of different subjects. If both self and gender are no longer considered stable or fixed, then feminism itself needs to achieve a coherence or unity in order to have political impact. While the waves have led to problems, the fact that the narratives are continuously employed and debated implies that a continued engagement with them is critically useful for expressing ostensible unity necessary for political furtherance.

'Wave' acts as a symbol that can benefit identity politics, remedying any divisive differences. Marxist feminism, queer feminism or black feminism all represent constituted social subjects of unique identity, and this specificity foregrounds difference as opposed to commonality. The wave, thus, becomes a possible remedy to the problems of disparate identities – it does not demonstrate preference, but engages with the political element of feminism, independent of a subject's identity. If the waves are 'simply those historical eras when feminism had a mass base' (Mann and Huffman, 2005: 58), then the narratives relate to a surge of action as opposed to the sudden proliferation of a certain 'type' of 'woman'. Riley suggests that the constant difficulty for feminism is to 'negotiate the quicksands of "women"' which will not allow it to settle on either identities or counter-identities, but which condemn it to an incessant striving for a brief foothold' (1998: 5). If this is the case, and 'woman' cannot offer solidarity, then the 'brief footholds' are offered in the form of social issues that result in mass action. If these surges of action occur within a limited temporality, it constitutes a wave that overlooks the specificities of identity in favour of achieving ends for feminism.

Thus, the wave could be most useful when considered as a surface cohesion. It does not necessarily reflect the depths of difference or richness of individuality, but enables continuity, inclusivity and multiplicity, whilst allowing feminism to operate independent of identity fixity. Butler suggests that ‘if identities were no longer fixed as the premises of a political syllogism, and politics no longer understood as a set of practices derived from the alleged interests that belong to a set of ready-made subjects, a new configuration of politics would surely emerge from the ruins of the old’ (Butler, 1990: 203). While not suggesting that the wave narrative will lead to the decimation of patriarchal political structures, they will facilitate the feminist aim to ‘rehabilitate the surface’ (Riley, 2000:48). Although surface-preoccupation is often portrayed as a negative quality, the wave can be a means by which to encourage feminists to engage with superficiality, a need to change specific policies or defend specific rights irrespective of deep, entrenched difference.

Identity politics, and the debate that they generate, inevitably leads to serious and involved introspection, which unfortunately, is not always useful when trying to implement social change. The wave therefore, can offer a move away from introspection of the movement by identifying surges of activity in which feminists can participate despite any fundamental differences. This view was echoed by a number of interviewees:

I think that waves can be *useful as a way of highlighting peaks of feminist activity*.

They refer to a broad range of activity and are usually time specific. So in that sense they show periods of feminist strength which is good. (Glasgow interviewee)

I think the idea of a new wave is really exciting; *it shows that there's momentum* a whole range of us all working on loads of different but related campaigns. (Bristol interviewee)

I think it's great we've got a third wave, and even a fourth wave. I think of myself as second wave and *it's encouraging to see younger women engaging in feminist activism and continuing the movement*. (London interviewee)

By accepting that multiple waves are inevitable while avoiding attributing each with a specific 'character', feminists are able to move away from conflict predicated on identity difference. Instead, the wave narrative could be welcomed as one possible remedy to the problems of generational feminism and identity difference.

Discourse

The wave metaphor traditionally relies upon conceptual (or thematic) and chronological assumptions; undoubtedly the narrative has a powerful purchase upon both academic and popular interpretations of feminism. The specific sets of knowledge and understanding that underpin the wave discourse have important implications for the continuity, inclusivity and multiplicity of feminism. If meaning is historically, linguistically and politically constructed then the fluidity of the wave metaphor is apt. However, if feminist waves are used as a 'grand narrative' that demands reference to oppositional discourse, it becomes problematic at best and reductive at worst.^{vii} To that end a greater reflection on the wave discourse can prove helpful to unpicking the wider feminist frameworks that they form a part of.

Those who engage with the wave narrative play their part in both the construction and reinforcement of the ideas and subsequent assumed sets of knowledge that surround each wave, as well as the ways in which they are routinely pitted against one another. As Gillis et al note, the wave narrative encourages discursive binaries (2004); this idea is reinforced in any number of ways, but most specifically by the language used by feminists themselves. Whilst some interviewees rejected the idea of the wave narrative, not least because many felt too young for the second wave, too old for the third and unsure of the fourth, others were more than happy to self-identify as second or third wave, often defining themselves against popular representations of the ‘other’ wave:

Most of the bloggers I know would rather die than call themselves second wave.

Second wave is seen as very exclusive and while they paved the way for us they did a lot of harm as well, [they] ignored a lot of women’s voices and so it’s quite an insult to be called second wave... (London interviewee)

As far as I can see *the third wave has not contributed much to the on-going aims of feminism* – the key ideas are still those from the second wave.

(Bristol interviewee)

As the two quotations above indicate, the temptation when discussing specific waves of feminism is to reinforce this oppositional discourse that now exists between the second and third waves. Moreover, the (re)articulation of largely negative stereotypical depictions of ‘the other’ wave formed a significant part of the interviewees’ discussions of the narrative. This oppositional discourse is not only unhelpful for feminism but also reinforces anti-feminist rhetoric propounded by a right-wing media, keen to highlight the ‘damaging’ consequences

of feminism. This oppositional framework is vividly highlighted in an article published in the UK's *Daily Mail* newspaper, 'How my mother's fanatical views tore us apart', by third waver Rebecca Walker. What is ostensibly a personal account of the challenges of motherhood becomes a damning account of how second wave feminism destroyed families.^{viii} The explicit aim of the article is to reinforce a false dichotomy based on two inaccurate assumptions: the perceived rigidity of the second wave and the 'anything goes' attitude of the third.

Amongst the interviewees there was a degree of uncertainty surrounding the wave discourse and its implications for feminism; we take this to be a positive sign, suggesting that feminists are willing to critically engage with the strategic uses of the wave narrative, an idea articulated by one Glasgow based feminist:

I'm not sure how helpful the wave distinction is, I would like to think of us more as a continuum. However, *if we are going with a wave idea then you would expect a massive 'crash', some sort of win for feminism.* So wave one - the vote; wave two - abortion act, equal pay act, so what would three be?

To this feminist activist's mind a wave should have some substance, an outcome or milestone to be marked en route to full equality. Measuring waves by outcomes is certainly one way of using the wave narrative, although this inevitably allows us to judge a wave to have failed if no significant goal is achieved. Adopting such an approach would likely prove problematic for feminists and the wider women's movement, as the failure/success binary reinforces a hierarchical approach to the waves.

As previously noted the wave discourse encourages feminists to make assumptions regarding which wave is ‘better’; this is obviously mediated by age, race, sex, class, sexuality and ideology *inter alia*. Indeed, it is easy to locate examples of the negative wave paradigm, something we argue reinforces internal power relations. Moreover, it is important for feminists to acknowledge the multiplicity of strands of feminism that cross the wave narrative – for instance radical feminism, black feminism, or lesbian feminism – whilst celebrating the inclusion of newer strands that emerge in response to societal change, such as cyber-feminism and queer feminism. Finally, multiple understandings of each wave should ideally be recognised and valued as a means by which to question the hegemonic discourse that sustains power relations between the waves.

Feminist praxis

The interplay between feminist ideas and practice is central to the advancement of the women’s movement and, we argue, to the ‘health’ of feminist theory; as is the avoidance of power dynamics between academics and activists (Dean, 2009: 336). For feminist scholars the danger lies in deconstructing the wave narrative without reflection, or reference, to the various ways in which it is used by activists, whether strategically or as part of an individual or collective naming process. Likewise, those engaged in the on-going struggle for women’s liberation can be extremely effective when questioning hegemonic discourse and grand narratives. Thus, for scholars, understanding how the wave narrative might provide both opportunities and constraints for feminism, is important.

Embracing feminism can be tied closely to the emergence of a new wave; this might be particularly true for younger feminists – an idea enthusiastically promoted by the US tranche of third wave texts (see for instance Baumgardner and Richards, 2000; Dicker and Piepmeir,

2003; Heywood and Drake, 1997). This, of course, is nothing new and each new feminist wave or generation does, at least in part, struggle with the tension between claiming the feminist legacy whilst not necessarily feeling connected to that history – indeed some may feel actively excluded from it. This dynamic becomes complicated for third and fourth wavers through the continuing presence of second wavers - who may resent calls for a new wave. As Seigfried notes “Part of our understanding of our own movement has come from rediscovering and reappropriating a past, the ignorance of which contributed to some false starts and dead ends but also to the exhilaration of the times.” (1996: 8) In many respects the wave narrative is liberating for emerging feminists; allowing them to ‘place’ themselves in an on-going women’s movement whilst also exhilarating in the challenges and struggles that collective action requires. The act of discovery is an important part of an emerging feminist consciousness, an act that should not be denied to either an individual or a generation.

The articulation of a new feminist wave is a critical feminist act: an act that does in itself recognise the continuity at work within the women’s movement, whilst also engaging with that important strategy of differentiation. At its most basic level heralding a new wave is a political call to arms. It is meant as a wake-up call, as several interviewees noted:

Having a new wave is important. *It allows younger women to feel like they can help get involved, like something new is happening and they won’t feel intimidated by trying to do things.* Sometimes it can be hard if you feel like older women are telling you how to do things and why you’re doing things wrong. (London interviewee)

You can really feel it at the moment that there's this real interest in feminism and that's great, it [feminism] suddenly seems to be everywhere; *a new wave naturally brings in new women*. (Bristol interviewee)

For these feminists, a new wave enables new and younger women in particular to feel confident that they can make a significant contribution to an emerging movement.

Accordingly, the wave narrative becomes a means by which the movement can expand as new waves typically bring with it new feminist activists. Several other interviewees stressed the pragmatic application of the wave narrative as having significant benefits in terms of attracting new activists. Moreover, by having a numerical wave narrative, a sense of continuity and history is claimed, enabling feminists to explore the work and ideas of other waves.

Western feminism has frequently been charged with operating exclusionary politics, a politics that focuses on the interests of white, middle class well educated women (hooks, 1994).

Accordingly, in addition to encouraging new generations of feminists to identify with the wave narrative, it might also encourage those who felt previously excluded. We noted the issue of race and age above, but another long-standing debate within both theory and practice is the extent to which men and the trans community are welcomed and encouraged to both identify as feminist and take an active part in the feminist movement. It is the inclusion of these two specific groups that many interviewees who identified as third or fourth wave were keen to ensure felt included:

Absolutely men can be feminists. We have to get away from this second wave focus on women-only activism, yes we're half the population but men are the other half and

we need them. To my mind that's what's important about the third wave. Also it's *much more open about trans issues and not just saying if you haven't got a vagina you're not coming in.* (Bristol interviewee)

I think *men feel more comfortable in this third or fourth wave* whatever you want to call it. They feel more included and that's important. (London interviewee)

So, in as far as the wave narrative can be used to expand the feminist movement to include trans activists and men it appears progressive. However, it is also clear that this emphasis on inclusion of those not born female continues to be highly controversial amongst some feminist activists – with intellectual and practical divisions. In 2012, a Radical Feminist conference in London intended solely for 'women born women' lost their venue when their keynote speaker, Sheila Jeffreys, was accused of inciting hatred through her transphobic speech. More recently in 2013, Julie Bindel cancelled her appearance in a debate on violence against women at University of Manchester on account of threats from trans-activists following an article she had written in 2004.^{ix} Despite the political commitment of these feminists, their positions serve to demonstrate the contention and debate that still surrounds the place of trans women within the movement.

The proliferation of new social media has had a profound effect on feminism; this is illustrated by the explosion in the number of websites and online communities that facilitate feminist activism (Dean, 2010). Moreover, it also provides a space for multiple feminist waves and political and epistemological strands. As such, the multiplicity of feminism has become a political reality thanks, in part, to the Internet. Although it has been noted that the Internet can be an aggressively racist and sexist space (Piepmeir, 2009:16; Penny, 2013); it

has provided a means of participation for women who for one reason or another are unable to attend meetings, events or protests and also operates an important site in which inter-wave dialogue can occur. With the noted increase in awareness and technological capability of most westerners, the important conversations about feminist aims and objectives can occur online. New technologies also move us beyond the academic/activist divide. This is important for inter-wave dialogue, not least because a significant body of work critiquing the third wave tends to be published in academic journals which are not open access, a point noted by one London based activist: 'I do think it's important for there to be greater conversations between academics and activists. You know we can't get access to articles, and the books are so expensive so it sort of feels one way.' However, technology can be similarly problematic even if it does appear to offer an egalitarian solution to feminism's hierarchies. The recent day of Twitter silence, instigated by journalist and author Caitlin Moran in August 2013, generated a series of debates surrounding platform and privilege (Baker, 2013). While Twitter does allow for the co-existence of numerous voices, some feminist personalities are considered more important than others, and so can wield the technology to greater effect. Furthermore, feminists do not all have the same levels of access to the Internet and in some cases, lack the requisite education to engage with its possibilities.

Conclusion

Whilst it has been argued that feminist activists need to learn the lessons from the first and second wave of feminism in order to 'break the wave paradigm' (Gillis and Munford, 2004), more prescient, is the need for feminists to reject oppositional discourse and crude characterisations of each wave. The wave, as with any metaphor, has obvious problems; however, it has significant potential as a means by which to emphasise continuity, inclusivity and multiplicity within feminist identity, discourse and praxis. Stressing continuity is

important not only as a way of acknowledging a feminist legacy but as a way of shaping on-going and future feminist debates and campaigns. Moreover, the continuity of the feminist movement is surely one of its greatest strengths. Inclusivity has now become a core part of the feminist agenda with feminists now giving serious attention to the discourse of privilege. Finally, recognising multiplicity is important for any serious engagement with the wave narrative; the coterminous existence of multiple waves and multiple strands within those waves are central to ideological, political and chronological feminist analyses.

Tong has argued that waves will continue to emerge as the feminist movement progresses (Tong, 2009: 291). Not only will academics continue to debate the use of the narrative but popular conceptions of feminism are likely to be framed by the wave metaphor for some time. Indeed, for pragmatic reasons alone new moments in feminism will undoubtedly be alluded to by some as heralding a new wave if for no other reason than to draw public attention to a set of campaigns. The power of discourse to shape our understanding of the world is illustrated through the use of the wave narrative. Whilst many feminist scholars have written important and insightful critiques of it as a way of framing feminism, the purchase of the metaphor is such that it is difficult to see beyond feminist waves. As such, we argue that it is of strategic and intellectual value for feminist writers and activists to critically engage with the narrative, to ensure that it does not continue to be used solely as a means by which to reinforce feminist in-fighting and crude, inaccurate caricatures.

It is important for feminists to reflect upon the way in which they themselves use the discourse surrounding the wave narrative; avoiding opportunities to simply strengthen pejorative assumptions. This does not mean that we should not be critical of aspects within a wave where it is seen to become emblematic of an exclusionary feminism, but it is important

to acknowledge that to label the entire second wave as racist or anti-men is both inaccurate and misleading; likewise writing off the third wave as naive and retrogressive is unhelpful and simplistic. We are not of course advocating a feminism free from healthy intellectual debate and difference that, after all, is a necessary part of having an inclusive form of feminism. Rather we seek to promote engagement with the wave narrative that foregrounds inter-wave dialogue and respect rather than one that reinforces a hierarchical approach to feminist waves. Given that the second, third and fourth waves are already coterminous it is not inconceivable that we will soon be including a fifth wave. In order to maintain and strengthen feminist solidarity it is vital that if and when that new wave does emerge, rather than question its necessity, we seek to prioritise questions regarding how it speaks to feminist continuity, inclusivity and multiplicity.

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ⁱ The first wave typically refers to the suffrage movement, the second wave refers to the liberation movement, the third wave is generally acknowledged to have emerged in the late

1980s and early 1990s with a stronger emphasis on intersectionality, whilst the newest wave, the fourth, embraces new forms of technology (Baumgardner, 2011).

ⁱⁱ Following Lear, we also stress the western nature of the wave narrative, acknowledging that non-western women have the right to self-determine their own feminist histories and trajectories, rather than having a western narrative of feminism imposed upon them. This becomes even more important when we consider that the first wave is largely characterized as the campaign for women's suffrage – something yet to be achieved in some states

ⁱⁱⁱ The research gathered for this project is part of broader research project being undertaken by Evans to compare third wave feminism in the UK and US.

^{iv} The need for, and guarantee of, anonymity was stressed in the interviews in order to encourage interviewees to be open and honest in their reflections of feminism. Given that there are relatively few feminist organisations in Bristol and Glasgow, membership of specific groups or biographical details of the interviewees are not provided as it would be relatively easy for several interviewees to be identified.

^v Italicised sentences or phrases in quotations have been added by the authors.

^{vi} Rebecca Walker, former editor of *Ms Magazine* (and daughter of leading African American feminist Alice Walker) wrote an influential article declaring herself to be the third wave, in the face of the anti-feminist backlash and the perceived dominance of post-feminism. Betty Friedan, author of *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) formed the National Organisation of Women and is most closely associated with a (white heterosexual) liberal strain of US second wave feminism.

^{vii} A call for feminists (and particularly those we might identify as third wave) to abandon the grand narrative of the wave metaphor was made by Lisa Jervis, co-editor of the US magazine *Bitch*; see <http://www.msmagazine.com/winter2004/thirdwave.asp> [accessed 24.4.2012]

^{viii} Available online: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-1021293/How-mothers-fanatical-feminist-views-tore-apart-daughter-The-Color-Purple-author.html> [accessed 20.4.2012]

^{ix} Roz Kaveney, a writer and trans-activist, outlined the problem of the ‘women born women’ Radical Feminism conference for the *Guardian*, available here <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/may/25/radical-feminism-trans-radfem2012> [accessed 24.10.13]. Sheila Jeffreys was offered the same platform to respond, in which she claimed that transgender activists had been silencing her and other feminists: <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/may/29/transgenderism-hate-speech> [accessed 24.10.13]. For Bindel’s event cancellation and history with trans activists see <http://www.independent.co.uk/student/news/death-threats-force-feminist-campaigner-out-of-university-debate-8821362.html> [accessed 24.10.13].